

## A Rocky Paradise In Putnam

*I came back from an early October visit to Stonecrop Gardens as jazzed up from what I found there as on my first visit thirty years ago. I'm living proof that Stonecrop's stated mission, "to inspire gardeners to explore the infinite variety of the plant kingdom and to encourage a joyful willingness to experiment in the garden" works. As educational as a botanical garden and as lovely as Shangri-la, if you have time to visit only one Hudson Valley garden, visit Stonecrop.*



Starting in 1958, Frank and Anne Cabot built their new home and gardens on sixty hilltop acres near the small Putnam County town of Cold Spring. Their first love was alpine plants, so rock outcrops, hypertufa troughs, specialty greenhouses and stone raised beds were created to grow these diminutive creatures which like well-drained soil and sunny locations. Soon many other features followed, including a woodland shade garden with rockbound pools and a wisteria pavilion with moon windows overlooking garden vistas. Stepping stones form a challenging path down the Himalayan Slope along a stream to the Bamboo Grove. Dawn redwood trees, rare at the time they were planted, have matured into a mini forest of lovely trunks and foliage. On the hillside above, a gravel garden features plants which like it hot, dry and sunny, many of which feature grey or silver foliage. Most astonishing is the conservatory, which houses a winter-blooming display of plants from the southern hemisphere, which seems to float on the small pond like a horticultural ship-of-the-line.



The Enclosed Flower Garden, behind solid cedar walls, is an inner sanctum and another world. The pattern of the beds, a series of squares and triangles, echoes the original latticework fence which surrounded this garden. Plantings of hardy perennials, roses, grasses, trees and shrubs provide a permanent framework and year-round interest. Within the beds, the yearly design of annuals, biennials, half-hardy perennials and tropical plants is big, bold and exuberant and built around a blending and contrasting color theme. It's a knock-your-socks-off garden, with the parade of blossoms changing daily but looking spectacular all season long. On our October 1 visit, fall asters, dahlias, celosias, nicotianas, marigolds, and zinnias were all in bloom, attracting pollinators and human visitors alike. Steeply terraced beds provide support for climbing plants which add vertical accents, but there are plenty of huge plants which do that as well, such as bananas, ornamental grasses and castor beans. Other climbers, including clematis, hydrangeas and honeysuckle, as well as espaliered shrubs, grow on the surrounding cedar walls. I've never been to Stonecrop to see the spring flowering bulbs, but I am sure they are magical as well.



Indeed, on my many journeys to Stonecrop, I've managed to miss the Bramble Rambler (rose collection) as well as the Pit House with its collection dwarf bulbs and other treasures. A visit every month the garden is open, from April through October, would yield an array of surprises and delights, and perhaps an inspiration or two for your own garden. *Story and photos by David Chinery*

[Click here for more information on Stonecrop Gardens](#)

## What to do in January?

Check your houseplants. Rest them in January. Keep them away from heat and water minimally. Remember to rotate the pots for even growth, and prune leggy plants. Start new plants with cuttings.

Pot Amaryllis and Paper White Narcissus bulbs for winter color.

Try forcing branches from spring flowering shrubs and trees, such as apple, crab apple and forsythia.

Sort through your flurry of garden seed and supply catalogs.

Create or update a master plan for garden beds.

Check on your supply of new or clean seed starting trays, pots and seed starting mix. Refresh as needed.

Consider starting seeds for pansies, snapdragons, and hardy perennials. Also consider starting, under lights, seeds for lettuce, celery, onions, leeks and early tomatoes.

Remember to check dormant plants and bulbs in your cellar or garage and give them a light watering.

Check last year's seeds for viability. Place 10 seeds between two damp paper towels, seal in a plastic bag, place in warm location. Check in 7-10 days, or longer for some varieties, for germination levels. If 7 or more seeds sprout, they are good for the upcoming season.

Clean and maintain garden tools. Sterilize tools by soaking in 1 part bleach to 9 parts water, then rinsing, drying and lubricating them with WD-40 or equivalent. Also sterilize pots and containers for the new gardening year.



## Leaf-less Along The Electric Trail

I like bikes and I like botany, and the two merge into one great outdoor activity. Identifying plants, seeing what's in bloom, and silently critiquing home landscapes is fun from a bicycle seat. Now that we have the Albany-Hudson Electric Trail (AHET), there's new territory to explore, and I've discovered some stands of an old-time favorite, winterberry holly.



To get to know winterberry, or *Ilex verticillata*, you've first got to deal with an apparent conundrum: it's a deciduous holly, dropping its leaves in the autumn. While most hollies are prized for their evergreen foliage, winterberry gets naked, but that makes its vibrant orange-red berries stand out all the more. These same strikingly bright fruits also label it a 55 mile per hour plant, since motoring botanists can identify it from a distance without applying the brakes. In summer, winterberry goes incognito, its plain green foliage blending with the roadside crowd.

Native to much of the eastern United States, winterberry isn't abundant locally. Most other hollies require good drainage, so winterberry's preference for wet feet is another sign that it's a bit of an odd duck in the Ilex clan. Dampish places of all sorts line the AHET, so it isn't a surprising find along there, but since it is rather scarce I won't spill the plant's exact locations. Winterberry's penchant for water also means you can use a canoe to see it. Back in 1988, I spent a wonderful weekend in the northern Michigan wetlands, canoeing, camping and cavorting with fellow horticulture graduate students, and the most abundant plant we saw was winterberry. It's so plentiful there that folks from the Wolverine State sometimes call it Michigan Holly, but you would never hear a New Yorker call it so.



With eye-catching fruits, which persist for a good part of the dormant season, winterberry brightens up any drab outdoor space. Luckily, you don't need swampy soil to grow it, as it will adapt to most sites, except the most alkaline. I've got two winterberries growing well where a spruce once towered, and they've finally got enough height and fruit to make a show. Like other hollies, the sexes are housed on different plants, and to get berries, you must plant females. Books instruct to plant a male nearby, since a male must do what needs to be done. But here's another mystery. Both of my winterberries make fruits a-plenty, but I've not planted a male, and I know of none nearby. Bees, it turns out, are the answer. Bees can carry holly pollen for a quarter of a mile, so if bloom time, weather, and bee activity are all in sync, the deed may be done by a distant him. Plant breeders have been busy bees, and have created dozens of permutations on winterberry: short plant, tall plant, and fruit in many sizes and hues. 'Sparkberry,' a red-fruited form developed at the National Arboretum, is the most popular, but they're all worth exploring, whether you ride a bicycle or not. *Story and photos by David Chinery*

## Spring Garden Day slated for March 16!

Spring starts Saturday, March 16 with "Spring Garden Day," a program of gardening classes and fun for gardeners, held at Tamarac High School in Brunswick. Attendees can choose from ten classes covering perennials, growing small fruit, tool sharpening, pruning, native plants, natural plant dyes and more. Jana Milbocker will show us the best public gardens, nurseries, display gardens and private gardens open to the public in her keynote presentation, "The Garden Tourist's Northeast." A plant sale, new tool sale, Pick-A-Prize Auction, and fabulous door prizes are other highlights. Participants also receive a delicious homemade lunch featuring soups, sandwiches and desserts. Pre-register early as this event always sells out. Call Cornell Cooperative Extension at (518) 272-4210 and ask for Marcie, or visit the website below for more information.

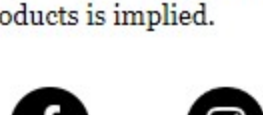
Spring Garden Day 2024



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